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THE ORIGIN OF THE ROMAN FORUM¹

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In accounting for the existence of the Roman Forum writers of guidebooks are accustomed to take their stand upon the margin of the Capitol or the Palatine and exclaim: "How natural it was that this plot of ground, nestling among the hills, should have become a common meeting place for the surrounding villages!" This will suffice for tourists, perhaps, but students of topography, history, or religion will still have pertinent questions to ask. Others of more learning will try to account for the Forum as a suburb of the Palatine city, the oldest stage in the development of Rome; they will connect the name with *fores*, "doors," and propose that the Forum was "out of doors" to the Palatine city, to which one retorts with a stubborn objection that *fores* cannot be used of the gate of a city. Another may remind you that Varro connects *forum* with *fero* and declares it to be the place where people "carry" what they have to sell. This, if true, would lend a ray of light, but a very slender ray. Professor Pais, in the chapter on "The Earliest Topography of Rome" in his *Ancient Legends of Roman History*, puts forward the view that the Janus gate was originally located at the foot of the Velia and was moved to its known site on the east side of the Forum with the extension of the boundaries of the Septimontium. To this the student of religion retorts with the words of Ovid *Fasti* i. 257:

Cum tot sint Iani, cur stas sacratus in uno,
Hic ubi iuncta foris templa duobus habes?

He will insist that the Janus entrance to the Forum can never have been a city gate, even if Varro makes mention of a Porta Ianualis, for the well-known reason that the Janus gate bore a religious character and the gates of a city are specifically stated to be profane

¹ Read at the meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America in New York, December 28, 1918.

according to the rites of foundation; to be specific, the ritual plow is lifted over the space of the gateway and the pomerium is interrupted. Moreover, it is unlikely or impossible on strategic grounds that a city wall should have traversed the low-lying site of the Janus gate. Therefore his hypothesis leaves us still in the dark about the origin of the Forum and the explanation of the Janus entrance.

Moreover, the assumption that the Forum was the oldest place of assembly and business in the ancient city is quite incongruous with many traditions. Professor Pais has done us the service of pointing out in the chapter above referred to that the Cermalus on the Palatine and the Comitium on the margin of the Quirinal seem to have been the primitive centers of Roman life. The space occupied by the Forum was available at a later time for public use only because it was naturally so swampy as to be previously unfit for private use. Tarquinius Priscus built the cloaca and laid the pavement, and this was manifestly a work of reclamation. There were no very ancient monuments in the Forum. The stories clustering about the Lacus Curtius only confirm the assumption that the land was unusable. It was in the Comitium that tradition placed the Ficus Ruminalis, the Mundus, the stone lion of Faustulus, and the Lapis Niger or so-called tomb of Romulus. It was here that the story of Attus Naevius with the miracles of the whetstone and the fig tree was localized. With the Comitium the Carcer was orientated, also the oldest Curia. It was here that the oldest basilica, the *Basilica Porcia*, was built. Here were formerly the seats of the tribunes and the tribunal of the praetor. The Comitium, we know, was also a place of business, since four shops were said to have been destroyed to make room for the first basilica (Livy xxxix. 44).

In this question of the Forum and Comitium one must also be diligently on his guard against the error of concluding that one was part of the other. An incontrovertible decision may perhaps be impossible at the present time, but the evidence certainly points to a definite separation of the two areas down till the extensive alterations of the Augustan age. The suggestion might be put forward in the meantime that the Comitium as a place of assembly developed out of a threshing floor that dated from a time more

remote than anything in the Forum. It is commonly held that the theater of Dionysus at Athens had such an origin, which is probably true of many another theater in Greek lands. At Rome there must have been many a threshing floor at one time along the margins of the hills, and the site of the Comitium certainly meets the requirements. It is protected from violent north winds by the ridge of the Quirinal and the Capitol, while moderate breezes from the west or southwest were almost sure to be creeping along the neighboring valleys. As at Athens in the theater of Dionysus, the outer margin of the floor was likely to be carried on a substruction. At any rate the Graecostasis, which was situated at one end of the rostra, was a *locus substructus*, and the front of the rostra itself, as it appears upon coins, was for some reason rounded. However this may be, the Comitium figured in the imaginations of the Roman citizens as the center of the most ancient public life.

For the original signification of the word *forum* it is probable that we must revert to those times when the Roman still dwelt upon the land and all the farm buildings for men and animals alike were contained in a spacious walled compound protected almost as securely as a military camp. Even in the later days of absentee landlords this camplike farmstead still survived in full vigor, and Varro describes it with adequate precision (*Res Rusticae* i. 4). By what term the area within the wall, so far as it was not covered by the buildings, was denoted we are not told, but we suspect that this was the *forum*. It was "out of doors" to the inhabitants of the villa and may well have been connected with *fores*, "doors." The part of the burial plot not covered by the tomb bore the name *forum* (Cic. *Leg.* ii. 24. 61). Moreover, Varro speaks of a *forum vinarium*, which seems to denote a space by the wine press where the gathered grapes were deposited (*R.R.* i. 54. 2); now this designative epithet, *vinarium*, may fairly be taken to imply that the whole space within the wall of the farmstead was the *forum*, just as in Rome itself the *forum boarium*, for example, would justify us in presuming the existence of the older urban *forum*. In other words, the *forum*, we should infer, was a courtyard.

If the Roman Forum was once a courtyard and private property, it can only have been the courtyard of the royal residence and the

property of the kings. Fortunately we know beyond all doubt that the residential section of Rome in kingly times was situated on the Velia and Sacra Via, just south of the Forum. Here were the houses of Ancus Martius and Tarquinius Superbus (Solinus i. 22; Pliny *N.H.* xxxiv. 13). The house of Valerius Publicola, it will be recalled, which he had begun to erect on the site of the residence of Tullus Hostilius, was moved from the summit of the Velia to the foot of it that he might avoid the suspicion of aiming at the kingship (Cic. *De Republica* ii. 53). Moreover, the sanctuaries of the Lares and Penates, which with good reason may be considered to have been parts of one or another of the royal residences, were likewise on the Velia. If further evidence were needed we have the *Atrium Vestae*, the round temple, and the *regia*, all of known location and connected in the traditions with Numa. We see, therefore, that the Forum was properly situated to constitute the courtyard and at the same time it seems inconceivable that there should have been no courtyard.

To round out the chapter one must speak of Janus, whose religious character was a mystery even in the days of Ovid, and here again we must return to the country residence of primitive times. Warde Fowler, in his *Roman Festivals*, accepts the idea that Janus was the house door and the spirit that guarded it, but Janus goes back to an antiquity far more remote than the Roman town house with a door opening upon the street. Janus was the entrance to the farm compound and the divine gatekeeper of the villa. He was the guardian of the single means of exit and entrance to and from the primitive household. "*Vilici proximum ianuam*," writes Varro, "*cellam esse oportet eumque scire, qui introeat aut exeat noctu quidve ferat, praesertim si ostiarius est nemo*" (*R.R.* i. 13. 2). Columella (i. 6. 6) is equally illuminating: "*Vilico iuxta ianuam fiat habitatio*." From this we infer most unmistakably that the farm-compound had only a single entrance and exit and that this was guarded. No servant could make his way out with a little pig or a chicken under his coat. No thief might make his way in. The watcher must never show the back of his head; in other words, he must be *biceps*. "*Frons occipitio prior est*,"

is a rustic proverb (Cato *De Agric.* 4): "Better show your face than the back of your head." Janus had eyes in the back of his head.

Our suggestion is that the Janus of the Forum was at one time the entrance to the royal courtyard, just as Janus of the villa was the entrance to the farm compound, and just as every load of hay or grain on its way to or from the barns, as every flock of sheep or goats or drove of hogs on their way to or from the pasture, and as everyone for whom the gate must be opened at night must pass the scrutiny of the gatekeeper, so there was a time in the history of the city when all the traffic of the court was required to traverse the Janus gate. Moreover, it is hardly likely that the Forum was a philanthropic institution, since even kings must live and usually at the expense of others. The Forum was a royal market and one must, in his imagination, bring back to this site the cattle market, the vegetable market, and the fish market, which were relegated in republican times to other parts as the political and judicial activities of the narrow Comitium overflowed into the more spacious area between the Capitol and the Velia. At the Janus gate the market fees must have been collected. Hence the money changers near by. Before the Temple of Saturn was erected the Janus Temple must have been a war treasury. Hence the bolts and bars and the opening only in time of war. Customs remain, it will be remembered, and reasons are forgotten.

The history of the Forum, as a matter of fact, opens up the interesting chapter regarding what the kings did for Rome. There is reason to believe that they, and the Tarquins in particular, in conjunction with the foreign merchants and artisans, taught the rustic Roman the pleasure and profit of city life, a lure he always resisted and usually embraced. What is the meaning of the ship's beak on old Roman coins? In later times, of course, it was told to children that Janus came to Italy in a ship, but this may surely be left among children's tales. There is an old British coin with a figure of a ship in full sail, and underneath is the inscription "Ships, Colonies, and Commerce." May this ship's beak on the Janus coins, for example, not signify that Rome was an emporium? Where else than in the *tabernae* built by one of the Tarquins on either side of the Forum

would you have bought your foreign wares? There must have been found the linens and purples that made the Roman feel self-conscious in Italian homespun; there the Tarentine wool that made the native article look and feel like sackcloth; there the oriental jewelry and the silver saltcellars that caused such worry to the senate. "Come along," we might imagine them saying, "and have a good time. Never mind the market-day dust, *nundinalis pulvis*. If you like imported wines you'll find the best brands from the Greek isles at the end of the Forum next the royal palace in the *tabernae* that the king has built. If you prefer a cheaper article you will find it in the Subura outside the Janus entrance; there you will find, too, fair company waiting to help you spend the money you have received for your lambs; they will drink with you and make music while you dance a tipsy three-step on the hated earth, and at last dispatch you homeward, drunk but happy, with no chunks of copper in your foolish fist." It must have been here that the vendor of "hot dogs" flourished, *nundinalis cocus*, another name for a scoundrel, *fur trifurcifer*, as Plautus hits him off in a clever pun (*Aul.* ii. 4. 45).

If anyone believes that Rome was merely the result of a fortunate geographical position and the Forum nothing but a casual evolution from an informal place of meeting, we suspect that he goes fundamentally astray. It is more likely that Rome was a "boom town" and made itself prosperous by advertising. When the kings built the cloaca and paved the Forum and erected the *tabernae*, they were looking out for more business and they went out to get it. The Roman farmer was a hard customer to handle and the prejudice against the town never forsook him, but he had his weaknesses and the proprietors of the Forum knew it. Take, for example, the sacrifice of the fat sheep on market days, which took place before the flaminica (Macr. i. 16. 30) in the Regia. From Festus (p. 186 Müll.) we learn that three sheep, no doubt the fattest and handsomest, were brought before the aedile, who was market clerk, and the best of the three chosen, whence *optimus*, "first choice," from *optare*, as our author would have it. The meaning of this, in modern terms, can only be that the market was to be a fat-stock show, and the well-known weakness of the Roman farmer for fine farm animals

was used to bring him to market. Religion was a weakness of his, and who can doubt that he grew rather more religious when he found himself by prudent care or happy chance the lucky possessor of a strain of snow-white sheep or bullocks with not so much as a black spot on the roofs of their mouths, or, it may be, on the other hand, as black as pitch all over? Such a man would be ready to believe both in the gods above and the gods below, for who can doubt that fancy animals brought fancy prices? Even Numa, we suspect, grave old deacon that he was, may not have been too lofty on festal days to see the profit of market days. He certainly instituted plenty of sacrifices, and sacrifices meant high prices for fine victims, larger crowds at the market, and more business for Roman merchants. Even funerals were turned to account, and the rustic was tempted to town to see the games, fully aware that he must slip a lamb or a calf over his shoulder, or more probably around his neck, to sell in the market as the price of his fun. Judging from the Roman calendars it seems certain that someone had set out to furnish a continuous performance. Who does not recall the story of the rape of the Sabine women and the crowd that Romulus enticed to the city by means of the circus? Whether the citizens won brides for themselves or not in this informal way is beside the question. The feature of the incident to be particularly noted is the presence of the women. When did a woman come to town that she did not have shopping to do? It was not the show that she cared for so much as it was the shops in the Forum. Did not her neighbors have silver saltcellars, and was she not as good as her neighbors? Was she to go on digging her fingers for salt into an old seashell when plenty of lambs fit for the market were scampering about the door and forever getting under her feet? Silver saltcellars she wanted and silver saltcellars she was going to have, even if Gaius had to sell his fatted calf. Therefore to the shops in the Forum she would go.

Someone in Rome must have realized how it paid to subsidize the shows. When rich republicans in later times would take advantage of the death of a relative to furnish the people with a splendid holiday, not without an eye for future elections, we suspect they were only keeping up a royal tradition that had formerly

encouraged such institutions both for commercial and political advantage.

To picture to one's mind this old royal Forum extending all the way from the altar of Saturnus to the establishment of Numa and the Vestals with the nearby fountain of Juturna, the namesake of Saturnus, the patron and patroness of the ancient market, one must think away the temples and basilicas of known date. All around the area must have run a wall with the double entrance of Janus on the eastern side—was one arch marked “This way in” and the other “This way out”?—and the little temple of the same with its “hundred bars of brass and everlasting strength of steel,” but containing nothing more formidable than the war treasure of the king. The Lacus Curtius would be there, of course, for the citizens were exceedingly superstitious and loved to see mementos of their famous families, and, in plain view to the right as one faced the hill, the Comitium with a busy life of its own, and above it the Senaculum, a quiet retreat where the old men might escape from the crush and “swap stories” of the great things they had done in the good old days. Looking toward the hill itself, shortly to be called the Capitol, our view is unobstructed by the towering ugliness of the Tabularium, and, on the summit, in place of the gilded magnificence of Jupiter, rise the intermingled boughs of oak and ilex.

Aurea nunc, olim silvestribus horrida dumis;
iam tum religio pavidos terrebat agrestis
dira loci, iam tum silvam saxumque tremebant.

However these details may have been, we return to our main thesis and state it as a syllogism: Janus was the sacred guardian of private property. Janus in the Forum had a religious character. Therefore the Forum was once private property. If it was private property, then it was the royal courtyard.